

Why the Bombers Thundered

STATINTL

By FRED BRANFMAN

WASHINGTON—The Nixon Administration's decision to reactivate the air campaign against North Vietnam could well be the most serious escalation since the Gulf of Tonkin in May, 1964.

The 350 planes that flew 24-hour, multiple sorties conducted raids as heavy as any ever launched against the North. Unless checked by public opinion, the Administration may well be prepared to level Hanoi and Haiphong, mine Haiphong Harbor, and possibly even bomb North Vietnam's system of dikes.

An exaggerated prediction? Consider these facts:

(1) The Administration made unprecedented attempts in the last month to prepare the public for massive strikes against the North. It previously bombed North Vietnam eight times in raids, involving several hundred planes, which lasted several days. Targets said to have been struck during these occasions included troop concentrations, fuel and petroleum dumps and airfields. All of these raids were carried out with minimum publicity, however. The large fanfare accompanying last week's raids suggests that the Administration has more in mind than in the past.

(2) The Administration has gone out of its way to provoke North Vietnam in recent months. North Vietnam has been officially bombed 186 times between Nixon's accession to office and Nov. 1, 1971. Thus there were an average of under six raids monthly during Nixon's first 34 months in office. In November, however, raids shot up to fourteen a month. In December there were over 26. It thus appears that the Administration was hoping to provoke a response from the North that could be used as justification for increased strikes, as with the 1964 Gulf of Tonkin incident.

(3) Official claims that the present raids are in response to North Vietnamese escalation cannot be taken seriously. Unsubstantiated press reports of North Vietnamese MIG's heavy artillery and tanks in Laos were not used by Secretary Laird to justify the raids. No correspondents saw the fighting for the Plaine des Jarres. Newsmen are not allowed on bombing raids over Laos. Thus there is no independent confirmation of claims of MIG's over Laos. The official report that four jets were shot down Dec. 17-19 over Laos was later admitted to

be false; that at least two had been shot down over North Vietnam, one east of Hanoi.

It is, perhaps, for this reason that Secretary Laird did not use such reports to justify the present raids.

(4) Mr. Laird's statement that the 1968 bombing halt agreement was no longer in force prepares the way for full-scale bombing of the North.

The thesis that the Administration will go as far as public opinion allows it is fueled by the fact, documented in the Pentagon Papers, that all official analyses deemed the 1965-68 bombing of the North a failure. A study prepared by the top-level Jason Division of the Institute for Defense Analysis, for example, stated that "as of October, 1967, the U.S. bombing of North Vietnam has had no measurable effect on Hanoi's ability to mount and support military operations in South Vietnam." This conclusion was shared by the C.I.A., International Security Agency of the Department of Defense, and former Defense Secretary McNamara.

If it is planning on observing previous limitations on the bombing, why did the Administration renew strikes against the North that were shown to be ineffective? And, in particular, why did it do so now at a time when it is making every effort elsewhere to show that the war is "winding down"? Could it be that it is prepared to bomb Hanoi, Haiphong, the dikes, if it feels public opinion will permit it?

Only time will tell. One thing is clear, however: the present bombing is serious, dangerous, and is causing heavy civilian casualties in North Vietnam, while not providing security in the south.

Secretary Laird has already threatened to bomb the "MIG airfields." Since those at Quanlang, Vinh, and Donghoi are quite small and have been bombed already, he apparently means two airfields near Hanoi, and another near Haiphong. When this happens, casualties will rise.

Our interviews with pilots who bombed the North indicate that the majority of ordinance dropped back in 1968 were antipersonnel bombs. These are bombs that cannot destroy a truck, bridge or even a tiny shelter erected in the forest; they are only designed for human beings. They include the pineapple bombs, which send 250,000 steel pellets per sortie spewing over an area the size of four football fields; flechette bombs, which consist of tiny barbed pellets that enlarge the wound

as they enter the body; and gourd bombs, which explode in the air and send their pellets down diagonally to enter holes where their targets may be hiding.

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